

Amendments to the Claims:

This listing of claims will replace all prior versions, and listings, of claims in the application.

Listing of Claims:

1. (Currently Amended) An automated method of launching a balloon comprising:
 - providing a collapsible protective cover comprising a flexible material forming an inner region;
 - providing a balloon;
 - inflating the balloon under the direction of a controller, wherein at least a portion of said balloon is inflated within at least a portion of said inner region of said protective cover, and the operation of at least partially inflating said protective cover is initiated prior to said step of inflating said balloon;
 - opening at least a portion of said protective cover forming an opening in said protective cover; and
 - releasing said balloon through said opening of said ~~inflatable structure~~ protective cover.
2. (Original) The method of claim 1, further comprising at least partially inflating said protective cover.
3. (Cancelled)
4. (Original) The method of claim 2, wherein said operation of at least partially inflating said protective cover extends at least a portion of said protective cover outside of a protective housing.

5. (Original) The method of claim 2, wherein said operation of at least partially inflating said protective cover extends said balloon from a first configuration to a second configuration.

6. (Original) The method of claim 5, wherein said first configuration comprises a packed configuration and said second configuration comprises an at least partially extended configuration.

7. (Currently Amended) An automated method of launching a balloon comprising:

providing a collapsible protective cover comprising a flexible material forming an inner region;

providing a balloon;

inflating the balloon under the direction of a controller, wherein at least a portion of said balloon is inflated within at least a portion of said inner region of said protective cover, wherein the operation of at least partially inflating said protective cover is initiated prior to said step of inflating said balloon. ~~The method of claim 5, wherein and~~ said operation of inflating said balloon is initiated after said balloon is extended from said a first configuration to said a second configuration;

opening at least a portion of said protective cover forming an opening in said protective cover; and

releasing said balloon through said opening of said protective cover.

8. (Original) The method of claim 1, wherein said flexible material is provided within in a protective housing.

9. (Original) The method of claim 1 or 8, wherein said balloon is provided extending at least partially within said inner region of said protective cover.

10. (Original) The method of claim 9, wherein said balloon is releasably attached to at least a portion of said protective cover.

11. (Original) The method of claim 10, wherein said balloon is releasably attached to said at least a portion of said protective cover via a loop wrapped around a portion of said balloon.

12. (Original) The method of claim 8, wherein said balloon is releasably attached to said protective housing.

13. (Currently Amended) The method of claim 1, wherein said flexible material comprises at least one of a polyethylene material and a ~~Tyvek~~ polyethylene fiber material.

14. (Original) The method of claim 1, wherein said balloon comprises a weather balloon.

15. (Original) The method of claim 1, wherein said protective cover comprises at least one extender for extending said protective cover from a first configuration to a second configuration.

16. (Original) The method of claim 15, wherein said first configuration comprises a packed configuration and said second configuration comprises an at least partially extended configuration.

17. (Original) The method of claim 15, wherein said at least one extender comprises an inflatable extender.

18. (Currently Amended) ~~The method of claim 17, wherein said inflatable extender comprises~~ An automated method of launching a balloon comprising:

providing a collapsible protective cover comprising a flexible material forming an inner region and an inflatable support structure attached to said flexible material of said protective cover;

providing a balloon;

inflating the balloon under the direction of a controller, wherein at least a portion of said balloon is inflated within at least a portion of said inner region of said protective cover, and the operation of at least partially inflating said protective cover is initiated prior to said step of inflating said balloon;

opening at least a portion of said protective cover forming an opening in said protective cover; and

releasing said balloon through said opening of said protective cover.

19. (Original) The method of claim 18, wherein said protective cover comprises a biasing structure for biasing said protective cover towards said first configuration.

20. (Original) The method of claim 15, wherein said protective cover comprises a biasing structure for biasing said protective cover towards said first configuration.

21. (Original) The method of claim 20, wherein said biasing structure comprises an elastic material for retracting said protective cover.

22. (Original) The method of claim 1, wherein said protective cover is biased toward a retracted configuration.

23. (Original) The method of claim 22, wherein said protective cover is at least partially extended from a packed configuration when said operation of inflating said balloon is completed.

24. (Original) The method of claim 23, wherein said protective cover is retracted from said at least partially extended configuration when said operation of opening at least a portion of said protective cover is performed.

25. (Original) The method of claim 24, wherein said balloon extends through said opening of said protective cover following said operation of retracting said protective cover from said at least partially extended configuration.

26. (Original) The method of claim 1, wherein said operation of opening at least a portion of said protective cover comprises passing a current through a wire.

27. (Original) The method of claim 26, wherein said wire comprises a nichromium wire.

28. (Original) The method of claim 26, wherein said current heats said wire.

29. (Currently Amended) The method of claim 28, wherein said heated wire ~~melts~~ releases a link to open at least a portion of said protective cover.

30 - 49. (Cancelled)

50. (New) An automated method of launching a balloon comprising:
providing a collapsible protective cover comprising a flexible material forming an inner region;
providing an uninflated balloon;
at least partially inflating the protective cover to extend the uninflated balloon from a first configuration to a second configuration; and
at least partially inflating the balloon, wherein at least a portion of said balloon is inflated within at least a portion of said inner region of said protective cover.

51. (New) The method of claim 50 further comprising opening a portion of the protective cover.

52. (New) The method of claim 50, further comprising releasing the balloon.

53. (New) The method of claim 50, wherein the balloon is releasably attached to the protective cover.

54. (New) The method of claim 50, wherein the balloon is a weather balloon.

55. (New) The method of claim 50, further comprising biasing the protective cover towards a first configuration.

56. (New) The method of claim 50, further comprising heating a wire to release a closure that keeps the protective cover closed.

57. (New) An automated balloon launching method comprising:
providing a collapsible protective cover;
providing an uninflated balloon;
at least partially inflating the protective cover to elevate the uninflated balloon to a filling position; and
at least partially inflating the balloon, wherein at least a portion of said balloon is inflated within at least a portion of the protective cover.

58. (New) The method of claim 57 further comprising opening a portion of the protective cover.

59. (New) The method of claim 57, further comprising releasing the balloon.

60. (New) The method of claim 57, wherein the balloon is releasably attached to the protective cover.

61. (New) The method of claim 57, wherein the balloon is a weather balloon.

62. (New) The method of claim 57, further comprising biasing the protective cover towards a first configuration.

63. (New) The method of claim 57, further comprising heating a wire to release a closure that keeps the protective cover closed.

64. (New) A method comprising:
at least partially inflating a protective cover;
at least partially inflating a balloon, wherein at least a portion of said balloon is inflated within at least a portion of the protective cover, the operation of at least partially inflating said protective cover occurring prior to said step of inflating said balloon;
opening at least a portion of said protective cover; and
releasing said balloon.

65. (New) The method of claim 64, further comprising at least partially inflating said protective cover to position the balloon within.

66. (New) The method of claim 65, wherein said operation of at least partially inflating said protective cover extends at least a portion of said protective cover outside of a protective housing.

67. (New) The method of claim 65, wherein said operation of at least partially inflating said protective cover extends said balloon from a first configuration to a second configuration.

68. (New) The method of claim 67, wherein said first configuration comprises a packed configuration and said second configuration comprises an at least partially extended configuration.